DigiTech HarmonyMan

Guitar effects pedal

The HarmonyMan is the first DigiTech intelligent pitch-shifter that's been specifically designed for guitarists.

Roger Cooper

The art of adding artificial harmonies to voice or instruments has been developing since the '70s, courtesy of innovative American companies such as Eventide. However, early harmony-generating devices mainly targeted the recording studio market and asking figures tended to be accordingly exotic. This situation changed for the better during the following decade when US effects specialists DigiTech decided to bring the art of intelligent pitch-shifting to an appreciably wider audience via more approachably priced products, better suited for use in a live performance environment.

Since then DigiTech have become very prominent in this niche sector, thanks to a succession of stand-alone and rackmounted models, each employing constantly refined technology intended to make the harmony production process easier. While this user-friendly policy has proved quite successful, a certain amount of musical knowledge has always been necessary to obtain optimum results. This is because until recently harmonies were determined by manually selecting the correct keys and scales, which meant that most intelligent pitch-shifters were primarily designed for use with MIDI-equipped keyboards. These units allowed players to add appropriate vocal harmonies, but didn't make life easy for guitarists wishing to beef up their singing in a similar fashion.

A major change occurred in 2007 via the arrival of DigiTech's Vocalist Live 2 and Live 4 pedals. These allowed six-stringers to easily create accurate and authentic harmony voices simply by strumming suitable chords while singing the melody. However, neither these nor earlier harmonisers met the needs of guitarists who wanted the same benefits for soloing. Until recently, these needs have usually been met by much simpler stomp boxes, which mostly provide fixed-interval harmonies with accordingly restricted application. But now DigiTech's smart principles have been employed for purely instrumental purposes in the form of the HarmonyMan. This suitably titled stomp box supplies a menu of multi-voice effects made possible by the company's exclusive musIQ note detection and chord recognition technology. In simple terms, this uses the chords played prior to a solo to select the most suitable accompanying harmonies, adding various options of one or two parts to the original lead line, while other pitch-related effects are also provided.

Construction and controls

As with other DigiTech designs, the HarmonyMan emanates from the good ole US of A. The beefy, cast-metal casing is obviously intended to survive on-stage wear and tear, while a pretty substantial weight should help it stay put, aided by a suitably grippy underside. Apart from a slightly greater height, proportions are similar to those of a closely packed pair of single stomp boxes. DigiTech have kept controls to a sensible minimum and these are aligned across the rear half of the top, while the sloping front panel accommodates two good-sized square footswitches.

A centrally mounted Harmony Key display forms the focal point of the control section, comprising an array of LEDs arranged in elliptical, 'circle of fifths' formation partnered by

PerformingMusician

DigiTech HarmonyMan
£249

This ruggedly built, double-size stomp box combines high-quality US construction with competitive pricing. While it may not be the smallest or cheapest guitar harmoniser on the market, DigiTech's latest creation has to be the best sounding and easiest to operate example around.

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adjacent musically related keys. With musIQ in operation, this feature confirms the harmony key automatically selected by the most recently played chords and accordingly updates choice as these change. With musIQ switched off, the final manual key is displayed instead and used to dictate alternative scale-based harmonies.

Over on the left are two rotary selector switches, each independently governing the choice of two intelligent pitch-shifting modes (Triad-Centered and Scalic) and these move to best match chord patterns being played, while Fixed (chromatic) and Detune are less flexible alternatives.

Accompanying display windows show all the selections and options for each voice include third or fifth harmonies above or below the original, an octave up or down, double-octave drop, unison tuning, a shift of 12 semitones in either direction and four detuned variations.

The original signal and the harmony voices can be blended in any proportion via the Mix pot, while two touch-buttons govern musIQ on/off and Store functions. The latter provides memory locations for four user presets and these can be recalled using the relevant Memory Select footswitch. This is also employed to manually set the correct key and scale, instead of using the automatic musIQ option. The process involves strumming a chord while keeping the footswitch depressed. This method also mutes output at the same time and is therefore ideally suited to songs that start with a solo.

The other switch is Harmony On/Off, with 'off' being true bypass. Holding it down operates the onboard tuner and with this engaged the Voice 1 display window indicates the appropriate note, while a row of LEDs shows sharp or sharp status.

Connections

All signal links are via standard jack connectors accommodated on the back panel. First in line is labelled Clean Input, which is what the HarmonyMan needs to correctly identify chords. This is partnered by Distortion Send and Return sockets, which allow an appropriate pedal to be inserted to dirty up the sound as desired. A Sidechain Input is provided to typically accept a second guitar, allowing this to provide the chord playing necessary to create the harmonies to accompany the solo performer. Its partner Thru jack supplies a clean feed to the rhythm player's amplifier, and earth-loop hum hassles should be eliminated by the Ground/Lift switch also included. Left and Right main outputs come next, with the former used for mono mode operation. The HarmonyMan is too big for battery power, so the connector quota is completed by the input for the 9V wall-wart type supply included as standard.

Performance

With the logical connection and level-setting procedures easily accomplished, it's time to check tuning, as correct pitch is vital to obtain optimum results. Once this is established, it's then simply a matter of selecting voicings via the Voice 1 and 2 controls. With musIQ engaged, strumming pertinent chords automatically establishes the key and scale, enabling either one or two musically correct harmony voices to be added to the lead line using the relevant on/off footswitch.

Tech Spec

HarmonyMan

- **Chord-determined two-part guitar harmony.**
- **Two independent voices, each with four pitch-shifting types.**
- **Four custom memory locations.**
- **Distortion loop and tuner.**
- **Voice 1 and 2 selector switches, Mix control, musIQ and memory Store switches, Ground/Lift switch.**
- **Harmony On/Off and Memory Select footswitches.**
- **Quarter-inch jacks for Clean Input, Distortion Send and Return, Sidechain Input and Thru, Output Left (mono) and Right.**
- **9V DC power supply included.**
- **Dimensions (WDH): 248 x 86 x 201mm.**
- **Weight: 4lbs.**

Respective volumes can be balanced via the Mix pot. With this fully on, only the harmonies are audible and musically these sound a little odd in isolation, although their aural quality is impressive, as is accurate signal-tracking ability. Using a more sensible setting creates very convincing end results, as the additional voices blend very well with the real thing. The memory function allows the progressive addition of a second harmony, building a solo via a layered effect that's instant Brian May.

Conclusion

Although not as easy to operate, the HarmonyMan certainly deserves to follow in the very successful footsteps of DigiTech's Vocalist Live pedals. The latter provide an almost indispensable service for any act lacking extra vocals, but guitar harmonies aren't as essential and should be used sparingly. This means the HarmonyMan is more of a specialised effects pedal, rather than a must-have piece of kit, so value for money isn't quite as high. That said, the price is still very reasonable for such a sturdy and well-designed, double-size, American-made stomp box. All guitarists who fancy making more of themselves simply must check out what has to be the most user-friendly and best-sounding guitar harmoniser currently on the market. ■ **PM**

A Sidechain input allows the chordal information to be derived from a different guitar to the one playing the part to be harmonised.